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ABSTRACT

As a means of comprehensive preservice education, mentor principals were selected using both naturalistic and quantitative methodology. The ethnographic technique of portraiture was also chosen as a means to understand and study the human relationships within the school and to understand the work of the principals in the context of these relationships. Twenty-four nominated principal mentorship school sites were studied for one complete day by teams of three students, and group portraitures were compiled of each. When examining these portraitures, similarities in leadership style emerged. The mentor principals were student-centered in their approach and values; had integrated special programs for both handicapped and gifted students into the mainstream of the school; had redefined the structure of control to encourage leadership among all staff members; treated everyone with respect including students, teachers, and parents; attempted to provide a safe, secure environment for students; and showed a strong commitment to the improvement of the educational structure of their school. Political and ethical issues were excluded from the portraitures. The collaborative process of compiling these mentor portraitures blurred the boundaries between university faculty and school practitioners, helping each to better understand the other in the study of principals in action. (5 references) (KM)

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CAPTURING LEADERSHIP IN ACTION: PORTRAITURE AS A COLLABORATIVE TOOL

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Capturing Leadership in Action: Portraiture as a Collaborative Tool

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The technique of portraiture is a useful tool in understanding the changing functions, roles, and styles of principals in effective schools. This paper will describe its use in the Danforth Principal Preparation Project at the University of Washington.

The Department of Policy, Governance and Administration at the University of Washington is engaged in a major redesign of the preparation program for school principals (under the direction of Dr. Richard Andrews, department chair). The Danforth Foundation supports the effort with funding from a Cycle II grant for planning and implementation of the University of Washington's Danforth Principal Preparation Project. At this writing, the program is in the first implementation year, fourteen Danforth Fellows are working with twenty-two designated mentor principals from schools within the Puget Sound Educational Consortium, directed by Dr. Ann Lieberman. The mentor principals provide internship sites and direction and guidance during the field-based portion of the program. The principals are also partners with university faculty in the development and teaching of curriculum modules on campus.

A Complex Collaborative Process

The Danforth Principal Preparation Program relies on a complex collaborative process for decision-making and implementation at all levels. The structure of the program is built upon collaborative teams of University faculty, Danforth fellows and school practitioners. Each team has a distinct, yet overlapping purpose. The collaborative teams and their purposes are: the Program Design Committee (PDC) decides policy and procedures; the Curriculum Deliberation Team plans and designs curriculum and instruction; the Core Curriculum Team provides the link between the university and the schools; the Evaluation Team plans formative evaluation.

Decisions of each team clearly affect decisions of all the other teams and the overall program direction. There are over 100 people involved in development and implementation of the Danforth Program. As can be imagined, communication between and among these groups is vital to the health of the program. Occasionally, this communication system creates confusion and misunderstandings. Most participants in the process have developed a healthy tolerance for ambiguity. They have grown to recognize that changes are inevitable and that confusion and a certain "messiness" are part of involvement in this complex decision-making process.

The constraints and the benefits of the collaboration are discovered when we focus on one aspect of the program; the selection process used for mentor principals during the spring of 1988.

Selection of Mentor Principals

Mentor principals and other school practitioners are the critical link of theory to practice in this innovative program. The selection process was designed by a collaborative working group, the Program Design Committee (PDC).

The selection process for identification of effective mentor principals is complex. A consensus decision gave each district autonomy to use criteria established by the committee to select principals who represented the best of leadership within each of the districts. Multiple data sources are used to make final selection decisions. Selection of mentor principals is based upon three data sources:

1) "exhibits" of the school goals, mission statement, examples of communication with faculty, parents and students, student achievement, self study reports and additional evidence of the substantive work of the principal within the school;
2) district nomination based on the Danforth Program guidelines and criteria; and
3) a written portrait of the principal in action at the school site.

The mentor principals were carefully selected using both naturalistic and quantitative methodology. The ethnographic technique of portraiture was chosen as a methodology to understand and study the human relationships and elements within the school, and to understand the work of the "principal in action" in the context of these relationships. Sara Lightfoot's themes of "goodness in schools" formed the basis of questions asked during the portraiture interviews, since evidence of these themes was

considered of primary importance in the selection of mentor principals. The PDC also identified principal characteristics based on state certification guidelines and a review of the literature.

Organization of School Site Visits

To accomplish the task of selecting these mentor principals, a process was organized to conduct the site visits to collect data for portraits by Kathy Mueller, Project Director, during the Spring of 1988. A consensus decision of the PDC was to create research teams of three persons to visit each school site. These teams were composed of two graduate students and a UW faculty member or a school practitioner from the Program Design Committee. These teams were scheduled to conduct interviews with parents, students, teachers, other staff members and to interview and shadow the principal. Graduate students from the College of Education at the University of Washington were recruited as team members and an intense preparation session for the Program Design Committee members and the graduate students was conducted.

A thorough preparation of the site team members in the research methodology of portraiture was conducted by Mary Anne Kendall, a Lightfoot Fellow who studied this methodology during an Ed.D. Program at Harvard University.

Portraiture

Portraiture is a particularly appropriate vehicle for collaboration between universities and school districts, since it combines the more scientific perspective of the researcher with the more anecdotal, impressionistic perspective of the school practitioner.

It is not surprising, then, that the need for a portrait methodology arose from a seminar of academics and practitioners drawn together by Stephen Graubard, the editor of Daedalus: The Journal of the Academy of Arts and Sciences. The practitioners in the group were "considered leaders in their field with exemplary records as thoughtful, purposeful, and skilled superintendents, school administrators, teachers and counselors." These were educators "who primarily saw themselves as activists, whose perspectives were more immediate, subjective, pragmatic, and uncompromising than their academic colleagues" (Lightfoot, 1983:7). This sort of collaborative study seems very suitable to

newcomers to the field of administration, who wish to study such mentors in action. Such was the case in the Danforth Principal Preparation Program.

Portraiture is a social science methodology designed to capture the culture of a place or the context of a person in action over a short span of time. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, in her book The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture (1983), details the origins of portraiture in both art and science. The scientific purpose of a portrait is usually to generate a theory that reflects the reality of a school culture or the characteristics of a main character, i.e., the principal. A good portrait depends on interpretation that is "emic", i.e., grounded in thin description which represents values and perspective of the main characters of the school setting. In this sense, portraiture ultimately is a construction of someone else's constructions of what they are about. Portraiture depends on rigorous attention to detail; it rests on triangulation and synthesis of various data sources such as observations, interviews, document analyses, hierarchical charts, diaries, and journalistic accounts.

While these "representations" of schools and principals are intended to faithfully reflect an objective reality that exists in the United States today, and not only in the eyes of the beholder, no effort is made to conceal or deny the particular intellectual, social, or moral preferences of those who have constructed these word pictures. The term portrait is meaningful because the "artist" is as much a presence in these portraits as are the schools themselves.

This sort of artistic and scientific collaboration demands trust in the observers and writers of the portrait as well as an openness to outside perspectives. "Portraits tell you about parts of yourself that you have not been aware of, or attended to, that are both critical and complimentary, tough and giving" (Lightfoot, 1983). The culturally specific description of portraiture is particularly viable since schools are public places where many outsiders and insiders draw conclusions and derive opinions about what they see and hear going on on a daily basis.

Application of the Methodology

The site visit teams were scheduled to spend a full day in each of the twenty-four nominated school sites, following training sessions and preparation for use of the portraiture methodology. Interview protocols were designed for use with the different

groups at the school site: parents, teachers, the principal, classified and other support staff, and students. The themes from Sara Lightfoot's book and the criteria established by the Program Design Committee were used to frame the interview questions.

The site visit teams met prior to the school visit to discuss their understanding of the methodology, review the protocols, share information from the exhibits about the school, and to establish their respective roles in the interview process. Each site visit began with an interview of the principal. All three team members participated in this experience to gain similar information about the school in context, and specifically about the principal's role within the school environment. Team members had different roles for the rest of the school site visit. A schedule of interviews was set up for two of the members, while the third shadowed and talked with the principal throughout the day. All team members spent time observing and participating in the classrooms, playgrounds, lunchrooms, and hallways of the school complex. At the close of the day, the team members met with the principal to give initial impressions and feedback.

Following the data gathering at the school site, the difficult work began of analyzing the "thin description" from the setting. "Thin description" includes field notes, tape recorded interviews, and documents. The ethnographic technique of triangulation, a search for congruence between actions, beliefs and words was used to create "thick description", impressions and interpretations of these thin data. Team members met together to share their insights and learnings and to triangulate the data on two levels: first, triangulation of data each person had gathered individually; and second, the triangulation of three team members' viewpoints about emerging themes. Once consensus was reached concerning the main themes, one team member wrote the first draft of the portrait. Shared editing followed until all members reached consensus about the portrait's content and the writing style.

Shared Editing

Several shared editing sessions were held with the graduate students who wrote the portraits. During these sessions critical feedback and editing took place, as did discussion about the constraints of the project and suggestions for improvement. A most exciting aspect of these discussions was the emergence of themes about leadership from across the districts in the Puget Sound Educational Consortium. In many of the schools where the principals were chosen to be mentors, we found interesting similarities in leadership style.

These informal observations were then combined with a more formal thematic and trait analysis conducted by Mueller and Kendall. Twenty-two of the mentor principal portraits were analyzed, similar leadership traits of principals were clustered, and prime traits emerged. The section which follows details the findings of this analysis. There is clear evidence in these schools of deliberate planning toward restructuring, conscious efforts to raise awareness of educational issues, and unique ideas and approaches to the renewal and change process.

THEMES ACROSS DISTRICTS

Students are the Center

In all cases, the mentor principals were very student centered in their approach and values. They subscribed to the developmental needs of students and gave precedence to instruction as the primary raison d'etre for schools. A general spirit of nurturance and caring provided the necessary context for the developmental needs of students. Study skills, advisory periods, and age-appropriate program adjustments were evidence of this value in action. Model teaching, observation, and collaborative coaching were seen by the principal as priorities contributing to the improvement of individual and collective instruction.

Equity and Excellence

Many of the schools we visited for the Danforth Program have a strong ethnic and racial student mix. Discussions about important educational issues, such as ability grouping, tracking, physical space, location of special programs, and integration of groups, were common in these schools. The emphasis on "special classes for every unique group" and "pull out programs" were on the way out. Such practices were being replaced by efforts to bring these programs into the mainstream of the schools. Programs for special populations of students, both handicapped and gifted, were frequently found to be well integrated into the mainstream of the school buildings and programs. There was concern about giving every student an opportunity to access knowledge. "If it's good for kids, it's good for ALL kids" was the sentiment strongly shared across the different principals and schools we visited. One principal, who was perceived to be an "enabler" by his staff, echoed, "ALL kids can learn." Each of the schools was on its own path in tackling these issues and none presume to have the answers. Yet, many of the principals

were conceptually committed to raise awareness and to begin the dialogue among their staffs and communities about the tough questions of equity and excellence.

Staff stratification was not evidenced in these schools. Teachers were equal partners in the mission of the school, and the principal was a collaborator in that process. A sense of traditional hierarchy was not present, but rather, a feeling that each staff member contributed in his/her own way. This staff equity and appreciation of diversity mirrored that found between teachers and students.

Inservice and staff development efforts support this conceptual understanding of the need for new systems to meet the needs of all students in these schools. We found that a cooperative learning and multicultural education emphasis was present in many classrooms. Teachers were using such programs as GESA (Gender Expectations and Student Achievement) and TESA (Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement) and they talked openly of their awareness to meet each child as unique and yet to build a "majority culture." These schools were "champions of equity." In several cases, principals had found ways to "bend policy" of special programs to promote equity and excellence. Beyond the boundaries of the immediate school, support staff, counselors, police liaison, and social workers are teaming with school staff and parents to provide the best educational opportunities for all children. The voices of many community members - voices for equity - were heard in many of the schools we visited.

Redefining Control

The principals in these schools discussed options to redefine control; for example, they spoke of "switching the locus of control from the central administrative office to encourage leadership and responsibility among all staff members." We saw evidence of this redefinition in listening skills, collaborative structures, leadership style, and the visible presence of the principal.

1) Listening. Many of these principals were noted as "good listeners"; most were directly available to their staff members without long waits or business-like appointments. They were perceived as available, and accessible to staff, students, and parents. There was evidence that they respond expediently to expressed needs. Unique solutions to resource problems are typical, and often involve a creative, persistent, or assertive approach to centralized administration or business partnerships. The Danforth Principals promote

discussions about educational issues, as well as particular student and parent concerns. These discussions are characterized by a listening spirit and a problem-solving attitude, and the principal is seen as facilitator.

2) Collaborative Structures. These principals initiated collaborative decision-making structures within their school buildings. These structures provided a format so staff could be heard regarding their ideas and concerns. Such structures provided principals in the big schools, those with more than 500 children, with an extension of themselves as listeners. Thus, they created "a network of ears" to help identify and solve problems, and to provide positive feedback and rewards for progress and growth. The Danforth Mentor Principals accept the ultimate responsibility for the school operation and the children's achievement, but see the value in sharing the decision-making process and the rewards of collaboration. The staff and principal typically share a vision which is collaborative in tone and substance. Many facets of the schools demonstrate this positive interdependence.

3) Contextual Leadership. We observed much evidence of contextual leadership. The Danforth Mentor Principals were good at "reading their environment" and adjusting their styles to meet the needs of the situation, at the time. Generally, these principals were not autocratic or authoritarian in leadership style. Democratic structures allowing input to decision-making were in operation on all levels. Volunteers were sought and encouraged to participate as part of a larger community of people meeting the needs of the children and the school. These principals quickly separate decisions into types; some decisions need input from others, and some decisions should "just be made."

4) Visible Presence. The principals we visited are clearly leaders who are visibly present in their schools. They greet children by name as they come to school, they are available to staff, they help load the buses, they walk the halls, they are available to assist teachers in the classroom and with supervision. These principals are present with teachers at small informal meetings and in the classrooms. They link communication between teacher groups and are aware and informed about the complex operations of their schools. Organization and time management are strengths we observed, yet teachers perceive them to be available when needed. Children in these schools knew their principals. We experienced these leaders communicating with and enjoying the children of the school. Even though most of these principals were very active and involved in district and state committees and professional organizations, they accept their responsibility to their school community and their pervasive presence is felt.

Respect - An Important Component of School Climate

Within these Danforth mentor principal schools, we found everyone to be treated with respect and caring, regardless of role or status, including specialists, parents, teachers, students, classified staff, volunteers, and administrators. Self respect was high among students and staff. One principal fosters a school rule which calls for "respect of others, yourself, and property." Pride in achievement and the school goals and mission was evident in conversations with everyone in and around these schools. In addition, students feel they are treated fairly, there is student participation in decision-making, and student discipline policies are clearly written and consistently followed. Such "democratic fairness" fosters the shared respect we observed.

Safe Haven for Students

In today's world a safe, secure environment is hard to find, the staff members talked about a need to provide a haven for students from some of the problems of the larger society, i.e., problems such as substance abuse, family chaos, lack of security, and confusing value systems. One principal suggested that "there are no bad kids, just bad behaviors," and the mentor principals all demonstrated a strong student rapport and counseling capacity. We found these schools to provide a "safe haven" for students.

School rules and structures provided an atmosphere of safety, calm, security, and order. They were well supervised, clean, and tidy, and frequently open before and after school with special activities in response to parents' working schedules. Community members work with the schools to provide positive alternative activities for students, alternatives to "hanging around, drugs, drinking, and video games that our corner culture provides." In some schools, students are strongly encouraged to become active in sports and other activities. Student advisory programs helped to break down the isolation often felt in large schools at both middle and high school levels. Community fund-raising activities were found to target at-risk youth. Special meetings and clubs were scheduled before and after school; parents and community members were active in making the whole day a rich, safe, educational experience. Students at all levels are actively involved in a variety of school leadership and community service activities.

Teacher Advocacy

Appropriate recognition for the crucial role of teachers in the educational process is a growing concern. In the Danforth mentor principal schools, we found the principals and teachers working as equal partners in education. Teachers are given input and responsibility for major decisions which involve their work, such as curriculum and scheduling. There were organized structures in schools to help "mentor" staff members who have a need to build their professional skills, or lack experience. These structures rely upon the expertise of the master teachers within the buildings, rather than searching for expertise outside the school.

Principals gave autonomy to teachers with respect to their professional growth. Teachers had choices about which workshops, observations, or institutes to attend to meet their own needs. These principals created opportunities to reward and celebrate the professionalism of their staff members through special events and activities. There was clear evidence that these administrators had respect for teachers; for their ability, knowledge of content, opinions, diverse learning and teaching styles, and individual needs.

Some principals spoke of their role to make the "important job of teaching" as easy as possible, to "eliminate barriers and problems" so teachers could do their "important work". With this support, and affirmation, we found teachers felt good about their role and their work. Principals held high expectations for teachers as the "knowledge experts" in their curriculum areas, and they gave priority to their classroom visits, observations, and collaborative conversations about instruction.

Equal Partners in Education

Many of these schools had strong connections with their business and parent communities. Parents were volunteers in many aspects of the education process; supervising lunch and playground activities, assisting in the classroom, in the administrative offices, and libraries. Parent-Teacher Associations were either well organized and active or in a definite forming and growing stage. We found evidence of strong business and community links in these schools. Many communities were active with the school in promoting and providing appropriate after-school activities, and giving the school program both financial and verbal support. Businesses and homes in close proximity to the schools help watch for and expect appropriate student behavior as children

travel to and from school. Open communication links were established to make everyone an equal partner in the education of the "community youth."

Change, Patience, and A Tolerance for Ambiguity

Discussions of renewal, restructuring, improving, and changing old structures were a part of every school we visited. Many unique and exciting ideas were discussed or enacted within the school settings. Staff expressed great pride and feelings of accomplishment and growth. In no case did we sense that the principals or the staff were accepting of the status quo. In all schools there was a sense of "dynamic tension" between the present reality and growth toward an ideal. Although a strong commitment is voiced for continued improvement, these schools called for patience and tolerance during the stages of growth.

Change-oriented principals and teachers and their communities had a recognition that ambiguity is a condition of change and improvement. Responses to these discrepancies between the real and ideal varied. Some schools called for "slow, planned change." Even with high expectations and clear visions, principals spoke with tolerance of the time it would take to enact a change process about crucial renewal issues. Other schools depended on risk-taking of the principal to promote change more rapidly. Whenever we found a principal maneuvering through the system to create change, we found a principal with strong values and beliefs related to his/her actions. Conflict was perceived as healthy, provided that there is an opportunity for open discussion of differences.

EMERGENT LEARNINGS

Constraints and Benefits

The time frame in which these portraits were conducted was compressed to a one day visit by three team members. This time limitation constrained the amount and depth of data gathered in the setting. These sketches seem smooth and coherent, simply because they are not based on detailed data collected over a longer period of time. We found that the portraits captured the main themes within a school culture when read by the principals and others who had visited the schools, yet were sometimes lacking depth of understanding of

underlying issues. The process of visiting schools, analyzing field notes, and shared editing was time consuming and involved, yet the benefits of the experience were clear.

All of the PDC members were expected to participate in a site team visit, and to go through the training sessions in the portraiture methodology with the graduate students who were to write the portraits. Several of the PDC members, both University faculty, and school practitioners did not chose to attend the portraiture training session when first scheduled, and a second session had to be planned. There seemed to be an attitude on the part of a few that training in the specific techniques of the methodology was not necessary. Once the teams were identified and assigned to schools, a few PDC members refused to use the agreed upon techniques for recording in the field. In five of the twenty four teams, the result was lack of field notes from a team member, which made our data analysis, in these cases, difficult and less thorough.

Our portraiture teams brought three people from the University and the field together for two days of data gathering, observation, and analysis. Team members had the opportunity to view schools through the use of a new methodology and to share insights and perspectives as they discovered the dominant themes within the school culture. Much was learned and shared by all members of the teams in this process and insight was gained into the inner culture of the school. In the words of one faculty member the "process was more beneficial than the product". One of the graduate students, who is both a parent and strong education advocate, had a further insight, "if this process was used and shared with the parents of the schools, you would never have to worry about raising money in the schools again." Other students in the process felt they "learned more by working with the team in two days than in an entire course"; and "the chance to know faculty (by working with them in this process) in a more personal way" was a great learning opportunity.

Ultimately, the process brought a different mixture of people together to examine and think about school culture. The traditional boundaries that exist between faculty, school practitioners, students and parents were redefined during this process. New perspectives and a broader view were gained by all who invested themselves in the learning opportunity.

Political and Ethical Issues

One of the difficult issues for team members was to give constructive feedback to the school principals they visited. In some cases, questions of ethics and politics confused the feedback. Another consideration was concern for the sensitivity and egos of persons.

School board and parent comments were occasionally potentially harmful to individuals. In cases where the issues were not clear in the minds of parents, it was difficult to decide how much, if any, of the information to share with the principal. In several situations, teachers had been dismissed or reassigned to better meet the needs of a changing school mission, or to fill program requirements. The Teachers Union often was involved in these cases, and interviewees talked about specific people as forces which were not beneficial to the change process on both sides of the issues. How to report these comments in a way not harmful to the continuing change process became an important question.

In addition to these political questions, three ethical questions emerged in the writing and analysis stage:

1) Do you give the principal feedback on personal traits seen as problematic by persons interviewed?
2) Do you tell the principal about serious concerns you perceive within the school?
3) How do you record and write about these concerns in the portrait?

Our conclusion about both these ethical and political issues was to write nothing in the portrait that could be seen as sensitive or damaging unless it was previously discussed with the principal. This rule helped to positively shape and focus our discussions and energy toward constructive reporting in the portraits. The portraits provided a vehicle for the presentation of characteristics of "goodness" of the mentor principals. However, if the principal requested this sort of information, it was made available to him/her in a private conference with the observer/writer.

Future Applications

Portraiture holds potential for many applications in the world of education. The Danforth fellows participated in a three-month data collection of their mentor principal as part of their coursework. They each wrote a fully developed portrait and all of them

expressed that this was a very worthwhile project, since it gave them insights deep into the school culture and the values and actions of the principal as a key player in that culture. In addition, the follows' perspective as observer was preserved in the portrait, and it sanctioned their many years of experience in the classroom and their "ways of knowing".

One of the Danforth fellows commented that, portraiture could be used by a principal or teacher, new to a setting, as a technique to understand the culture of the school. Further, a teacher might use the methodology to understand and evaluate their classroom culture and growth over the course of the year. At the University of Washington, portraiture will be used to understand the change process in middle schools involved in a Ford Foundation Grant over two years. Teachers from the Teacher Leadership Strand of the PSEC will use portraiture to study shared leadership in several schools. In addition, the methodology will be used to capture change as part of a comprehensive evaluation of one of the Washington State Schools for the 21st Century Project.

Summary

In conclusion, we found strong patterns linking the public persona of the school and the personal style and beliefs of the principal. The themes which emerge point to a new breed of principal, one who is grappling with the school as a center of change. Changes in society, new family structures and different student expectations will result in alternative school structures and an emerging role for principals as facilitators of change.

The methodology of portraiture was useful in describing potential mentor principals to entering administrative fellows in the Danforth Program. It offered contextual and style information, written in an anecdotal form similar to the natural conversational style of practicing administrators. Ways of knowing schools intuitively have been captured in these portraits which blend creative and analytical voices. Portraiture as a collaborative process blurred the boundaries between University faculty and school practitioners, helping each better understand the other in the study of principals in action.

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